

## SPIRITS OF THE ABOVE

\* 776 Nuer call such a charismatic person *gwan kwoth*, owner or  
 792 possessor of Spirit, the name of the particular spirit sometimes  
 being added, as *gwan kwoth deang*, the possessor of the spirit  
*deang*, or *gwan kwoth mani*, the possessor of the spirit *mani*. He  
 is also referred to as the *guk* of the spirit, a word meaning a leather  
 bag. The prophet is a bag containing the spirit. 'Possessor' might  
 seem to be here an inappropriate translation of *gwan* ('father',  
 'owner', or 'master') since the spirit possesses the man rather than  
 the man the spirit, but the man does own the spirit in the sense  
 that it is in him and gives him spiritual power ordinary people  
 lack.

\* 776 It appears to be first known that a man has become possessed  
 792 permanently by a spirit, either without or after sickness, by sus-  
 828 tained abnormal behaviour and occasional bouts of frenzy. In  
 these states, which are said to occur most frequently in the earlier  
 phases of possession, when the spirit comes, or leaps, upon, or  
 moves the prophet (to use Old Testament expressions) he acts like  
 a madman (*yong*), and Nuer cannot always distinguish for certain  
 at this stage between a prophet and a madman or epileptic (*gwan  
 noka*); but if there is any doubt it is dispelled by the later beha-  
 viour of a prophet, for he ceases to prophesy only when possessed  
 in the narrow sense of being for the time out of his mind and gives  
 spiritual guidance when in a normal state to those who ask for it.  
 From time to time he may have renewed mantic seizures, but  
 these are regarded by Nuer as only outward signs of a spiritual  
 power which directs his utterances whenever he speaks as a pro-  
 phet and also when, as sometimes happens, he speaks as a judge  
 and political leader. Nuer conceive of permanent possession of  
 this kind, in contrast to temporary seizure in the form of Spirit-  
 induced sickness and mediumistic trances, as a filling with Spirit  
 as with air. They use the word *gwang* to denote Spirit penetrating  
 or entering into and filling the man. A prophet is a person filled  
 with, or inspired by, Spirit, which controls him as the *Ruah*  
 Adonai controlled the prophets of the Old Testament. The word  
 [176] *gwang*, which has much the same general sense in Dinka,<sup>1</sup> is used  
 for such actions as scraping out a gourd, hollowing out a canoe or  
 mortar, or the burrowing of a hole by a wild beast. Something is  
 hollowed out to allow entry for something else. Dr. Mary Smith  
 tells me that Nuer have told her that when a spirit *gwange run*,

<sup>1</sup> R. Trudinger, *English-Dinka Dictionary*, 1940, p. 204.

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fills a man, his character is changed. The man is hollowed out by 776<sup>x</sup>  
 Spirit to receive it. In this sense *gwang* is complementary to 792  
*awoth*, inspiration to extirpation. 828 ●

Prophets may perform sacrifices on behalf of individuals or 776<sup>x</sup>  
 of the people of their neighbourhoods in times of sickness, for 792  
 barrenness, and on other occasions when spiritual aid is required, 721  
 but the main social function of the leading prophets in the past  
 was to direct cattle-raids on the Dinka and fighting against the  
 various foreigners who troubled the Nuer from the northern  
 Sudan. For the most part the air-spirits are conspicuously asso-  
 ciated with war, and Nuer prophets are chiefly regarded as the  
 medium through which God gives orders to fight and victory.  
 The spirits accompany the warriors to battle.

Before Nuer set off for any large-scale fighting against strangers 776<sup>x</sup>  
 their prophets made sacrifice and sang hymns to the spirits of the 792  
 air while the warriors, kneeling on one knee and with the points 721  
 of their spears resting on the ground, sang the responses. The same 533  
 posture is adopted by warriors in making the responses to these  
 songs when they are sung by a song-leader on ceremonial occa-  
 sions. Also people, generally and perhaps always under a prophet's  
 direction, sing hymns to the spirits on occasions of sickness and  
 of other troubles; though Nuer say that they sometimes sing  
 the hymns, as at dances, 'just to be happy with the son of God'.  
 Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to record more than  
 a few verses of these hymns.

I give below a short hymn to *buk*. It is known all over Nuer- 776<sup>x</sup>  
 land and is therefore probably earlier than most hymns. It is 533  
 sometimes sung at mortuary ceremonies, and it is also sung before 539  
 fishing battues are begun, on account of the spirit's association  
 with rivers and streams.

Mother of *deng*, the ants (the Nuer) ransom their lives from  
 thee,

Mother of *dengkur*, the ants ransom their lives from thee,

The mother of *dengkur* brings life,

The mother of *dengkur* brings me life,

Life is revived.

She brings life and our children play.

They cry aloud with joy.

With the life of the mother of *deng*, with the life of the mother  
 of *deng*.

‡ [Should be *expirations*, see *synonyms*, cat. 116.]  
 (45)

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on the Sobat river was born of a woman of the Leng lineage and has, moreover, married a wife to the name of his maternal uncle and begotten children to him by her; so, though he is not himself a man of the Leng lineage, he has intimate ties with it, and he lives with its members. His brother told me how one day Cam killed a lion which he believed to be killing his cattle, for, his brother commented, 'Cam has no sense at all'. He returned from his successful hunt bending his fingers like claws and crouching as though he intended to spring on the people around him. A sheep was at once sacrificed to the lion-spirit, and Cam composed himself. While I was living in a cattle camp at the same village of Yakwac, which is occupied by part of the Leng lineage in the dry season, a girl of the lineage was taken hold of by the lion-spirit and had hysterics. Her family sacrificed a sheep to the spirit and dedicated a cow to it, for the seizure was thought to have been due to their failure to dedicate a cow to it earlier; and the girl was restored to her normal self. The Thiang lineage of Kurmayom village, also in Lou country, are another lineage whose totem is the lion, and they told me that they would not kill lions unless the lions first killed their cattle, for then the lions would have done wrong (*dwir*) and they would be in the right (*cuong*) in retaliating. This lineage has *mut luony*, spear of lion, for its spear-name. Another friend, Rainen of the Leek tribe, told me that he used to respect lions because his paternal grandfather's mother had been born twin to a lion in Dinkaland (she was a Dinka), the lion twin having run away into the bush. He said, however, that he had ceased to respect them when they began to eat his cattle. He conceded that the lions which ate his cattle were small lions from Dinkaland and not the large lions of Nuerland, but he felt he had been wronged by lions as a body and now refused to respect lions of any kind. He said '*ce theak thuk*', 'the respect is finished'. The same man told me that in the past, before lions began to eat his cattle, he had sometimes tied up a goat in the bush for them, and they had taken it. In the terminology I am using he had a totemistic relationship to lions. I have no certain knowledge that any mammalian species besides the lion is the primary totem of a Nuer lineage. The waterbuck, as will be seen later, is a secondary totem of a large clan.

A considerable number of lineages respect reptilian species. The large lineage of the Lak tribe who are known as *cieng Gangni*

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774 and is not an integral part of him. They do not attach any impor-  
 [196] tance to it and there are no beliefs and practices connected with  
 it. They presumably see an analogy between a man's shadow and  
 his soul, the shadow being the best way they can find to figure the  
 sort of thing the soul might be. The analogy may derive from the  
 idea of ghosts being shadowy replicas of the living. The fact that  
 other creatures and things have shadows does not lead Nuer to say  
 that they have souls; and since they have no souls, in their case  
 the shadow does not at any time have a figurative meaning.

Nuer hold no decided opinions about the nature of the soul,  
 which does not surprise us in view of their lack of interest in what  
 happens after death, or of how there comes to be one. They know  
 [842] that the foetus begins as a result of the male sperm entering into  
 the womb. The child is begotten (*dieth*) by man. But it is also  
 created (*cak*) by God, so it appears that they think of conception  
 as a product of this combination of human and divine action. But  
 it does not necessarily follow that because a man is alive he  
 has a soul. Gatbuogh was alive. So when we observe that Nuer  
 [858] do not mourn or hold a mortuary ceremony for a dead child, it  
 suggests to us that either they do not think of a small child as  
 having a soul or they regard it as immature. It is only when he  
 begins to take part in activities of the social life that he is said  
 to be a person (*ran*), and Nuer sometimes indicate that the sign  
 of having become a person is the removal of the second lower  
 incisor teeth, which is done when the child is about seven or eight  
 years of age. On the other hand they speak of infant twins  
 having one soul. Clearly they hold no definite opinion about the  
 matter.

774 Though Nuer would not themselves bring the ideas of flesh,  
 ● 828 life, and soul so neatly together, we can see that taken together  
 they are covered by the concepts of both *pwony* and *ran*. *Pwony*  
 means the whole creature, the individual or the self, what is one  
 man and not another. '*Pwonyda*' is 'myself' and '*pwonyda pany*'  
 is 'my very self'. *Ran* is what we may describe as 'the person', the  
 social being as distinct from the individual creature. Its plural  
 form *nath* is the word Nuer use to distinguish themselves from  
 other peoples. They are *nei ti nath*, people (in the general sense of  
 the word) who are people (in the sense of persons as Nuer think of  
 themselves). *Pwony* is, as it were, the total organism, *ran* the total  
 personality. As I have explained, a small child is the one but not

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the other, and twins are two *pyony* but a single *ran* (p. 128). However, the idea of the soul, as we have noted, seems to be attached chiefly to the concept of *ran*, to belong to the representation of a developed social being. An animal has, or is, a *pyony*, but it is not a *ran*, except in a purely figurative sense. 774 823 ●

Nuer do not attribute souls to creatures other than man except perhaps cattle and elephants. They speak of the *sie* of a man at his mortuary ceremony going together with the *sie* of the sacrificed beast away from the living to wherever the ghosts may be, and since in sacrifice, especially in piacular sacrifice, there is an identification, discussed in a later chapter, between man and ox, it is understandable that, at any rate in sacrificial contexts, Nuer should speak of the souls of cattle. But though Nuer imply in relation to sacrifice that cattle have souls, they have no clearly formulated belief to that effect, and I am not sure that they would agree to the proposition if it were put to them as a question unrelated to sacrificial intention. Nevertheless, it may be supposed that since Nuer sometimes speak of an ox's *sie* they think that cattle have in some degree intelligence and will and a personality that survives death, however vague it may be.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, they speak of the ghosts as herding cattle in wherever it is they have their abode. That Nuer reflect on this question, and also that they are undecided about the answer to it, is shown by the fact that Dr. Smith, so she tells me, has often been asked by Nuer whether she thinks cattle have souls. 774

Though I have never heard Nuer speak of an elephant's *sie*, that it is thought to have one is implicit in the belief that if the rules about the division of the tusks of a slain elephant are not observed the dead beast may *gwor*, track down, those responsible (Dr. Lienhardt tells me that in Dinka the word means 'to take revenge'). *Gwor* has here, therefore, the same sense as *ciem*, haunt. 774 224  
Also, Dr. Howell states that the man who first speared a slain elephant, and is therefore by a convention regarded as responsible for its death, has to have his right arm incised by a leopard-skin priest before he can eat or drink just as if he had slain a man, and a beast is sacrificed in the one case as in the other. He says [152]

<sup>1</sup> That a cow in a kind of way can be thought of as a person is suggested by other facts. A *sie* is performed to separate twin cows, which are hence, unlike other beasts, regarded till then as being one, as human twins are. A *sie* is also performed, to prevent the calf sickening, when the first milk of its dam is taken for human consumption. See also Chap. X.